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SUBJECT: TAJIKISTAN A DECADE AFTER THE CIVIL WAR

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¶1. (SBU) Ten years after peace accords ended the 1992-1997 civil war, President Emomali Rahmon has taken a great deal of credit for pulling Tajikistan out of conflict and setting it on a path which he claims could be a model for other post-conflict societies. At a June 25-26 conference commemorating the Moscow signing of the peace agreements (reftel), government officials and visiting diplomats praised the progress made over the last decade and focused on Tajikistan's future, while a few lone voices cautioned that the peace could not be sustained without allowing all Tajik citizens freedom of political expression. The anniversary of the end of the civil war provides an important moment to evaluate Tajikistan's present, understand how far Tajikistan has come, and what remains to be done to ensure stability and prosperity.

THE BLEAK BASELINE

¶2. (SBU) Peace and stability did not come with the stroke of a pen. In June 1997, Tajikistan was exhausted after fighting between regional factions had left 50,000-70,000 dead (the government estimate is even higher) and hundreds of thousands displaced, afraid to go back to communities riddled with landmines. Food was scarce-staples such as flour and oil sometimes had to be smuggled over the border from Uzbekistan. Militias and bandits roamed the streets, which were empty after five in the afternoon. The school system barely functioned and some families sent their children abroad for education and safety. President Rahmon's supporters, including the Popular Front and others largely from Kulyob, and the United Tajik Opposition, a coalition of the Islamic Renaissance Party and separatists generally from Khorog and Khujand, reached a truce, but mistrust and skepticism existed on both sides.

¶3. (SBU) The "General Agreement on the Establishment of Peace and National Accord in Tajikistan" promised a new era of reconciliation and national unity, but ten years later, the agreement has a mixed legacy, one of security at the price of democracy, and economic consolidation rather than overall prosperity. We outline achievements and disappointments below.

THE GOOD THINGS

¶4. (SBU) Peace: Tajikistan enjoys true internal security and calm. Gone are the curfews, the bandits roaming the streets

and holding people at gunpoint, or kidnapping young women - practices which lasted well after the peace accords were signed. For years, "stability" has been the priority for the government and Tajik citizens alike, loathing anything resembling unrest. Even staunch oppositionists in Rasht shudder at the idea of criticizing Rahmon or doing anything to rock the boat. The memories of the war still serve as a powerful deterrent to conflict.

15. (SBU) Economic growth: Although it still only functions at 60% of its 1991 indicators, Tajikistan's economy has indeed grown by a healthy 8-10 percent every year. Dushanbe boasts more cars on the street, more shops open, more goods available in the shops and bazaars -- all signs of normalcy. The cell phone industry is one of Tajikistan's most lucrative new sectors. Heavily influenced by migrant workers returning from Russia, Tajiks are slowly becoming consumers, buying cell phones, internet services, and name brand clothes. Several coffee shops serving high-quality coffee have sprung up in the last year, as have trade centers and a chain of grocery stores with imported products from Europe.

16. (SBU) Regional Stability: Tajikistan has gone from being the region's war-torn problem child to one of Central Asia's more stable countries. Since September 11, 2001, Tajikistan has provided unfailing support for U.S. NATO operations in Afghanistan and proven itself a committed partner in the global war on terror. Rahmon is cultivating a role as Central Asian statesman, offering to work with Iran behind the scenes and to play a more active role in Afghanistan's reconstruction. Since his re-election last November, he has traveled extensively in the Arab world, including to Syria where he showed off the Tajik model for peace-building.

17. (SBU) Border control: In late 2005, Tajikistan took complete control of its borders when Russian troops acceded to a Tajik request and withdrew all but a few officers in an advisory capacity. Since then, and contrary to Russian claims that the

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situation has deteriorated, the Tajik border and military forces have maintained or exceeded Russian levels of security and drug interdictions, although arrests and convictions have not kept pace with the increased confiscations.

18. (SBU) Limited religious freedom: The Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan is Central Asia's only legal Islamic political party. Although many government officials still distrust any public role for religion, recalling that the opposition came from Tajikistan's more conservative and religiously observant areas, Rahmon's government has allowed religious activity, and permitted the Islamic Renaissance Party to operate and participate in the parliament. Given the issues with Islamic extremists in Afghanistan and Uzbekistan, and the memory of Iranian support for the opposition, Islamic groups in Tajikistan enjoy more freedom than might be expected.

THE DISAPPOINTMENTS:

19. (SBU) Consolidated political power: The peace agreement called for 30 percent of all appointed government positions, ranging from cabinet members to deputy ministers and local government, to be given to the United Tajik Opposition. With his cabinet reshuffle following the November 2006 presidential election, Rahmon removed the remaining "opposition" ministers from the cabinet, and the number of opposition in other positions is dwindling. Instead, the government now consists of relatives and insiders from Rahmon's home region of Kulyob, with only a few exceptions. The consequences of this consolidation include a government paralyzed and unable to make decisions at a working level (and sometimes ministerial level), for fear of losing one's job, and the perception among the populace that Rahmon is a one-man government. Interestingly, there does not seem to be an heir apparent, nor has Rahmon taken steps to ensure a presidency for life.

¶10. (SBU) Shrinking political pluralism: Under the motto "Economics before politics," Rahmon's government has carefully restricted political parties' activities and orchestrated elections to the governments' advantage (possibly being the only post-Soviet leaders to fudge the numbers downward for his most recent presidential victory) by prohibiting political party training and preventing access to independent media. With the exception of the Islamic Renaissance Party, Tajikistan's few opposition political parties limp along, without much opportunity or inspiration to build their platforms and membership. The Islamic Renaissance Party walks a fine line with the government, careful not to seem too powerful in order not to incur a crackdown. U.S. assistance projects that touch on democratic institution building, civil society reform, or media freedom, face extraordinary bureaucratic hurdles, and occasional run-ins with the security apparatus. Non-governmental organizations have come more under scrutiny, and a restrictive new law on public associations gives the government more oversight over NGO activity.

¶11. (SBU) Economic consolidation: To the victors go the spoils, and to Rahmon's family and friends, go the state-owned enterprises and lucrative government positions. Tajikistan did not have much at the fall of the Soviet Union, but what it did have ended up largely under the control of trusted Kulyobis. Although not as egregious as the presidential family businesses in the other Central Asian republics, Rahmon's extended family has the lock on most industries in most sectors, and continues to enjoy privileges and advantages not open to others.

¶12. (SBU) Fear of public demonstrations and dissent: A surprisingly large number of Tajiks blame political protests in Dushanbe in 1992 for sparking the fighting that led to the civil war. Thus, even the most committed opponents resist any sort of public demonstration that could dredge up memories of the war. The press is largely self-censoring, afraid to tackle tough topics or mild criticism of the government. Authorities fined and imprisoned a newspaper publisher for stealing electricity in 2005 after he published a letter criticizing government policy; the unusually severe penalties sent a chilling message to the media about the price of free speech.

¶13. (SBU) Crumbling infrastructure: Peace has not improved public utilities. Tajik citizens lament the fact that they had more electricity and cleaner water during the war years than they do now, and last winter's electricity shortage brought unusually public complaints against the government. Tajik Air

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is barely surviving off the remnants of its meager inheritance from Aeroflot. Although the Chinese and other donors are refurbishing several main transportation arteries, the bone-jarring roads to smaller communities worsen after every winter.

¶14. (SBU) Lack of social spending: The miserly amount Tajikistan spends on basic education and health care is yielding a generation unprepared to lead the country towards democracy and further economic growth. Tajiks now grow up not learning Russian or any second language, further isolating them from the developed world, and leaving youth susceptible to threats from HIV/AIDS, narcotics trafficking, Islamic extremism, and anti-Western media messages. Tajikistan's hospitals do not have enough medications or equipment to diagnose and treat basic ailments. (Note: The Embassy health practitioner visited one hospital that was sterilizing gauze for re-use on surgery patients. End Note.)

¶15. (SBU) Limited religious freedom: Despite allowing Muslims to practice, the government keeps a close watch on mosques, and has proposed a number of changes to further limit religious activities. Further, the government has threatened a number of Christian organizations and groups, including missionary non-governmental organizations and the Jehovah's witnesses.

WITHER TAJIKISTAN:

¶16. (SBU) No one in Tajikistan wishes to return to the days of the civil war. The achievements of the last decade have been less about Rahmon's leadership, and more about a desire to avoid conflict at any cost. However, a new generation of Tajiks with no direct recollection of the war years, are coming of age. If they remain shut out of the political process and cannot find jobs in an economy controlled by the president's inner circle, they may not give Rahmon a pass for having established security, as their parents do. In the longer term, Rahmon will need to change his ways and style of governance if he hopes to maintain the peace he worked to achieve.

JACOBSON